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Articles in Today's Clips

Thursday, January 12, 2006

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Child abuse, neglect cases rising

Thursday, January 12, 2006

JESSICA SOULE
THE SAGINAW NEWS

A report on child well-being indicates Saginaw County has the fourth highest number of confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect, a figure that rose steadily between 1995 and 2004. Saginaw County social workers verified 1,118 cases of mistreatment in the latter year, up from 665 almost a decade before, says the latest Kids Count in Michigan report, issued annually as part of a national effort to improve the lives of children.

The Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Detroit-based Skillman Foundation, the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation and United Way funded the study.

Some 29,737 Michigan children were victims of abuse or neglect in 2004, up from 21,159 in 1995, the report says.

In the county, 3,873 kids came from families social workers investigated in 1995, and 4,617 in 2004.

Across Michigan, the number of children in families suspected of abuse or neglect rose to 157,693 from 139,260 in 1995 nine years earlier, a 13 percent increase.

While Randy R. Barst recognizes the overall jump in the number of cases, the director of the county's Department of Human Services suggests the study shows not just a higher occurrence of abuse, but rather more people voicing their suspicions.

"There's been better reporting (of mistreatment), and we are finding more cases that were there to begin with," Barst said. "I know the Child Abuse and Neglect Council has been active, and so (has his agency), to educate the community to look for signs of abuse and neglect."

The Child Abuse and Neglect Council of Saginaw County makes more than 1,500 presentations a year to workers in constant contact with children, said Ellen O. Hatcher, education director for the organization.

The state's Child Protection Law requires certain professionals, such as teachers, doctors, emergency workers, counselors, law enforcement officials, clergy members and child care providers, to voice any suspicions of abuse.

Some residents hesitate to voice suspicion because they lack proof, Hatcher said. Social workers need to know where to look "to stop the cycle of abuse," she said.

"Just don't ignore it," she said. "Most of the time (there's) a cry for help. Not every bruise is abuse, but it's over a period of time or a pattern of behavior."

Besides raised awareness, another factor helped boost the number of confirmed and investigated cases, Barst said. The Department of Human Services employs more workers now than in 1995 so they can spend more time on investigations, he said.

Many child advocates say neglect and abuse often coincide with poverty.

Saginaw County has the third highest child poverty rate in the state, which dropped to 18.6 percent from 27 percent in 1995.

Child poverty stood at 14 percent in Michigan in 2002 and rose to 18 percent in 2004, says the American Community Survey, which the Kids Count report cites.

Jessica Soule is a staff writer for The Saginaw News. You may reach her at 776-9682. The Saginaw News Lansing Bureau contributed to this report.

Help ensure healthy babies for state's future

Child welfare conditions improve, but infant deaths still way too high

Detroit News Editorial
January 12, 2005

Conditions have improved for Michigan's children in a number of categories, according to the newly released Kids Count report. The improvements in the face of a faltering state economy indicate that better organized and focused resources can be brought to bear on areas where the state is still lagging in child welfare.

The Kids Count report is produced annually by Michigan's Children, an advocacy group for children, and the Michigan League for Human Services. While the rate of confirmed victims of child abuse or neglect was up by more than 40 percent in 2004 from 1995, child welfare officials told The Detroit News the increase could be attributed in part to improved reporting and public awareness of the problem. If true, that's good news.

The number of children in poverty declined from the mid-1990s to the early part of this century. The rate of child deaths declined by a fifth and the teen death rate fell by a third.

Teen pregnancies declined by more than a third and the high school drop out rate was cut in half. This is all good news and shows that attention to the welfare of children can pay off in improved results.

Unfortunately, too many low-birthweight babies are being born in Michigan, and there are still too many infant deaths. The number of infant deaths and low-birthweight babies has stayed the same or worsened despite an improvement in the rate of mothers receiving pre-natal care statewide.

The picture for infant mortality and low-birthweight babies in Detroit is significantly worse than for the state. The answer must be continued outreach efforts by local health agencies statewide and in Detroit to ensure pregnant mothers get the care and education they need to deliver healthy, normal weight babies. Efforts to improve conditions for infants and children have been successful in many areas, but the surest way to give a child a healthy life is to make sure he or she is a healthy infant

Michigan's child well-being			
Child well-being in the state improved in many areas.			
Child health			
Less than adequate	1994-96	2001-03	Percentage change
Prenatal care	24.5%	21.7%	12% better
Low-birthweight babies	7.7	8.1	5 worse
Infant mortality (per 1,000)	8.3	8.2*	1 better
Child deaths, ages 1-14 (per 1,000)	26.4	21.4	19 better
*No percent			
Adolescence			
	1994-96	2001-03	Percentage change
Births to teens, ages 15-19 (per 1,000)	50.6	35.8	29% better
Teen deaths, ages 15-19 (per 100,000)	85.5	59.5	30% better
	1999-00	2003-04	
High school dropouts	6.2%	3%	51% better
Source: Kids Count in Michigan			
The Detroit News			

Arrest Made In Canton Infant Death Investigation

Police Responding To 911 Call Find Boy Dead

POSTED: 7:19 am EST January 12, 2006

The 23-year-old boyfriend of a mother whose 8-month-old boy was found dead in a Canton home Tuesday was arrested by police.

Police and fire crews responded to a 911 call from a home on Sheldon Road of a child not breathing at about 9 a.m. Tuesday. Officers determined the boy died sometime during the night, Canton police said.

An investigation into the boy's death resulted in the arrest of the mother's boyfriend Wednesday. Police did not release further details on the investigation.

Police are reviewing the case with the prosecutor's office. The Canton man is being held at the Canton Police Department.

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Trenton Father Accused Of Infant Abuse

Girl Spent 27 Days At Children's Hospital

POSTED: 11:57 am EST January 11, 2006
ClickONDetroit

A Trenton father, accused of severely beating his infant daughter, faced charges in court Wednesday.

Brian Popilek is charged with assault with intent to murder and child abuse. He appeared in 33rd District court in Woodhaven, Local 4 reported. The abuse allegedly occurred in the family's Trenton home, located near Groh and Ann avenues.

Police started their investigation in August 2005 when the victim -- who was 2 months old -- was brought to a hospital with multiple injuries, including 11 broken bones, a fractured skull and trauma to her brain, according to a police report.

Doctors and police said the injuries were not accidental and believe it is a case of shaken-baby syndrome, Local 4 reported.

Local 4 said police believe the abuse started when the baby was 2 weeks old and after Popilek, 25, lost his job. Popilek's mother said the charges are unfounded.

"I can't believe that they would think that, it's just not him," said Kristen Popilek.

The girl spent 27 days at Children's Hospital and is now in the care of family members, according to the station's reports. It is not believed the girl's mother is involved.

Decatur mom faces assault, arson charges

Thursday, January 12, 2006

rhall@kalamazoogazette.com 388-7784

A Decatur woman accused by police of stabbing her 1-year-old son and then setting fire to her mother's house Tuesday was arraigned on felony charges.

The toddler, meanwhile, is expected to make a full recovery, authorities said.

Angel Gipson, 33, was charged Wednesday in Van Buren County District Court with assault with intent to commit murder and with arson. She was being held today in the Van Buren County Jail on \$300,000 bond.

Decatur police were called to the South Williams Street house of Gipson's mother at about 5:20 p.m. Tuesday after dispatchers received a call reporting that Gipson had just cut her baby.

A short time later, dispatchers got several calls reporting that the house was on fire. When officers arrived, Gipson, her mother and the toddler had safely evacuated the residence, which was heavily damaged, Decatur Police Chief David McLeese said.

McLeese said authorities determined that the toddler had been stabbed once in the stomach. The boy underwent surgery Wednesday at Bronson Methodist Hospital in Kalamazoo and was expected to make a full recovery, the police chief said.

Gipson has not made any statements to investigators about the incidents, McLeese said Wednesday.

He said Gipson's family members have told investigators that the woman is five months pregnant and did not have custody of the toddler or a 9-year-old daughter.

The boy and girl live with a sister of Gipson's in Grand Rapids, McLeese said, and had recently gone to Decatur to visit their mother for the holidays.

Police recovered a butcher knife that investigators believe Gipson used to stab her son, according to McLeese. Gipson is scheduled to be back in court Wednesday for a preliminary examination. At that hearing, a prosecutor will present evidence against Gipson and ask the judge to bind her over to circuit court for trial.

The assault charge is punishable by up to life in prison; the arson charge carries up to 20 years, court officials said.

Former official accused in sex crime

Trace Christenson

The Battle Creek Enquirer

TAMPA, Fla. — A former Calhoun County commissioner and Battle Creek businessman will be in a Florida courtroom today after being arrested Saturday on charges he used a computer to solicit a 14-year-old girl for sex.

Kurt L. Rhode, 48, of Lakeland, is charged with computer pornography after detectives with the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office said Rhode was arrested when he went to meet who he thought was a 14-year-old girl. "It originated in an America Online (AOL) chatroom," said Master Sgt. Bruce Woodbury of the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office. "He initiated a conversation."

Woodbury said Rhode thought he was communicating with a young girl but instead was writing to a sheriff's department female detective who was using the chatroom to search for child predators.

"The conversation turned sexual and in his dialogue he identified himself by name and gave other identifications about himself," Woodbury said.

The first computer contact was Oct. 11, Woodbury said, and the detective waited for Rhode to make suggestions.

"We make sure we are not leading in our questioning and that the defendant in each case does not take the lead," Woodbury said Wednesday. "He makes all the first moves."

On Saturday, Woodbury said, Rhode expected to meet a young girl in a commercial area in Brandon near I-75 and Brandon Boulevard.

"He arrived at the appointed time and in the appointed car, the one he described, a 1986 Mercedes convertible with Michigan tags, 'Rhode,'" Woodbury said.

Rhode was jailed and is being held on \$100,000 bond.

Woodbury said a computer was seized from Rhode's home in nearby Polk County and on Tuesday Michigan State Police from the Computer Crimes Division in Lansing raided Rhode's Battle Creek home and seized another computer, according to MSP Detective Lt. Jim Wolf.

Wolf said the computer will be sent to authorities in Florida where Woodbury said all the devices will be studied for evidence of this or any other crimes.

Rhode was serving his third two-year term on the county board when he resigned in March 2000, citing a need for more personal time. He also is a former chairman of the Burnham Brook board of directors.

Rhode is a former co-owner of The Estate Group LLC, an investment and retirement planning firm in Battle Creek, still in operation on Columbia Avenue.

According to Christopher S. Moore, co-owner of The Estate Group, Rhode started the business with Bruce Juergens but retired about a year

ago.

He told police when he was arrested that he was retired.

Trace Christenson covers crime and courts. He can be reached at 966-0685 or tchrist@battlecr.gannett.com.

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Michigan business

THE HIGH COST OF KEEPING WARM: Choice: Heat or food

Utility bills take their toll on more Michigan families

January 12, 2006

BY ALEJANDRO BODIPO-MEMBA
FREE PRESS BUSINESS WRITER

Andrea White couldn't believe her eyes when she opened her heating bill for December recently. It was \$397.

The 35-year-old single mother of four is struggling to find a way to stay current on her other bills and still keep the heat on in the modest wood-frame bungalow she rents on Detroit's west side. She is among a growing segment of the state's population that is being forced to choose between heating their homes and buying food or medicine.

"With my income being a very basic minimum salary, you have to make decisions on whether I pay \$250 this month or do I go grocery shopping," said White, who has worked as a customer-service representative for a temp agency since July. "It is a situation where we have to make decisions on whether you eat or not."

Most can handle increase

Everyone has heard for months that heating costs were going to jump this winter. Hours after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita ripped through the gulf coast region and crippled the nation's energy infrastructure, experts and pundits were predicting record-high natural gas bills.

But even as Michiganders seethe over the cost of natural gas and other utility bills, most are able to bite the bullet and shell out the extra money to keep the lights and heat on in homes and businesses. Still, for most residents, monthly energy expenses have jumped at least 50% from a year ago and it's not uncommon to see a heating bill of up to \$400 for an average-sized home. A big portion of the increases can be traced to a poorly understood Michigan law that allows utilities to recoup costs for natural gas on the wholesale market every year. The Gas Cost Recovery program is different from a traditional rate increase because utilities do not profit from the higher charges.

Yet customers still have to pay the increase.

Carter Stevenson, the principal purchasing agent for the City of Detroit's Finance Department and an expert on natural gas production and delivery said people are making "dire choices."

"Now, we're in the kind of position where lots of residents...have to make those kinds of decisions" whether to pay a bill or pay for food, Stevenson said.

Michigan households are facing an ever-increasing home energy affordability gap, according to a survey conducted by The Heat and Warmth Fund (THAW), a Detroit-based nonprofit.

National standards dictate that an affordable energy bill should equal 6% of a typical household income. But for many Michigan families with low incomes, that 6% threshold was crossed in previous years and will grow. THAW says the affordability gap will grow from the current average annual rate of \$400 to nearly \$1,100 this winter.

There are more than 180,000 Michigan households living on incomes at or below 50% of the federal poverty level and they are having difficulty keeping up with escalating heating costs. Poverty for a family of four is defined as an annual household income of \$19,350, reports the U.S. Census Bureau. Michigan, which ranks 26th in the nation in poverty, had more than 11% of the state's residents living at or below the poverty line.

More to the point, there will be a projected \$963-million affordability gap in Michigan, due in large part to a lack of private donations and declining funds for the federal Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP).

"We just want to get through this winter without people dying," said Kathleen Walgren, executive director of THAW. "This is our Katrina. We saw this coming, but I think that we haven't paid attention to good energy policy for a long time, as a country and as a state."

Despite the fact that the numbers of families vulnerable to getting shut-off notices from their utilities have increased in recent years, there are some skeptics who suggest that the problem is isolated to the extreme poor, which represents a small minority of Michigan's population.

But the numbers don't lie, says Walgren.

During the past two months, Michigan's two largest utilities -- **DTE Energy Corp.**'s MichCon and **CMS Energy Corp.**'s Consumers Energy -- announced natural gas rate increases that would boost the typical residential customer's monthly bill to an average of around \$200, though many in urban areas like Detroit have been getting bills of more than \$300 in recently.

Keeping the thermostat low

Allen Briggs, a 66-year-old retiree in Royal Oak, saw his December heating bill go from around \$82 in 2004 to \$197 last month.

Living in a bungalow, Briggs is incredulous about the excuses given by the utility companies.

"I just don't understand how my bill can double like that," said the former hourly worker for **General Motors**, who plans on asking for help from THAW. "They can't justify that. This is the same thing the oil companies did with petroleum."

A savvy saver, Briggs lives in a modest home that is paid for, doesn't have a car payment and is able to live modestly on his pension, Social Security benefits and a 401(k) plan. Yet to conserve energy, the avid golfer has taken to wearing a jacket in the house while watching television or eating dinner.

Nevertheless, he considers himself one of the lucky ones.

"When it comes to the poor people, I never felt so bad for somebody in my life," he said. "I really don't know how some of these families are going to make it."

Officials at MichCon, the natural gas unit of DTE Energy that serves 1.2 million customers, said they had a 10% increase in the number of customers requesting to be put on the company's BudgetWise billing program compared to last December. Consumers Energy has a similar plan called the Winter Protection program that is available to any of the 1.7 million customers it serves that qualify.

"We recognized early on that it was going to be an incredibly rough winter for many of our customers," said Lorie Kessler, a spokeswoman for DTE. "We've tried to make our customers aware early on that natural gas prices were increasing. One of the things we've encouraged is that our customers enroll in our budget billing program" which spreads out energy payments over 12 months.

Willie Coleman and his wife Gina have opted to get on the program.

The Detroit couple's heating bill including previous arrearages is around \$1,000, according to Willie Coleman, a 49-year-old veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard. With the help of THAW and

other organizations, the Colemans have been able to pay down their debt, while learning ways to better conserve energy.

"We've been in the situation where it was either pay the bills or pay the rent," he said.

"Sometimes we'll pay the bills this month and then double up on the rent next month. It's hard."

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Millions hit by shortfall in heating aid

As fuel prices have soared, federal funding hasn't budged

By John W. Schoen
Senior Producer
MSNBC

Updated: 12:39 p.m. ET Jan. 11, 2006

With winter not yet half over, the surge in the cost of heating a home has already begun to stretch consumers' budgets to the limit – and beyond. Sales of wood stoves have surged. In the farm belt, they're burning surplus corn to keep warm. And a scarcity of funding for fuel assistance has squeezed millions of low-income families, as money budgeted for groceries or medical supplies is now being consumed by higher heating bills.

For Linda Kelly, a Quincy, Mass. mother of three, higher heating costs kicked in last October, just after her husband's health plan doubled the co-payments on the family's prescription drug coverage. Kelly suffers from multiple sclerosis and one of her daughters is diabetic. So without help paying the heating bill, the family faces some tough choices.

"Maybe (my daughter) won't test as often as she should using the strips," she said.

"Maybe I'll go an extra day, miss one pill during the week. You do what you can."

To make ends meet, Kelly first turned to the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, as she's done for the past five winters. Under the 23-year-old program, assistance is available for a typical family of four earning less than \$30,000 a year. But this winter, with energy prices soaring, funding for the program just hasn't kept up.

"When I was first on it, it was around \$700 you got for the season," she said. "That's when (heating) oil was selling for 60 or 70 cents a gallon. Now it's \$2.59 a gallon, and we only get \$525. So that doesn't even fill a tank."

This winter, help for the Kelly family came from an unlikely source -- the government of Venezuela. With federal funding unable to meet the needs of millions of families, Kelly's Democratic Congressman, William Delahunt, turned to Venezuela, which arranged -- through state-owned Citgo Petroleum -- to sell millions of gallons of heating oil at below-market prices to low-income families in Massachusetts and New York. State officials in Maine and Rhode Island are working on a similar plan to buy discounted oil from Citgo. Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, long a thorn in the side of the Bush administration, has said he is just trying to help poor families that have been ignored by their own government. Critics of the plan say he's simply out to score political points.

As home heating costs have surged in the U.S., so has the number of families who can't keep up with rising energy prices. And as cold weather set in this winter, local community service agencies like CTE, Inc. in Stamford, Conn. say they've been swamped with applications for assistance.

“Phone calls were out in the stratosphere,” said Keith Sears, who heads the program at CTE. “We’ve had to hire additional people just to handle the calls.”

The reason is simple: fuel prices have soared since last winter. The Energy Information Administration's latest short-term outlook, released Tuesday, estimates that heating oil customers can expect to pay 23 percent more for fuel this winter than they did a year ago. Households that rely on natural gas can and even bigger jump — some 35 percent on average. And if temperatures are colder than normal, those bills will run even higher, the EIA said.

Home heating oil prices have risen as the global price of oil has jumped to more than \$60 a barrel, more than doubling in the past two years. Natural gas prices have been pushed up by several forces: much of the gas-rich Gulf of Mexico was knocked offline by back-to-back hurricanes, and higher crude oil prices has pushed up demand for natural gas from industrial users who can switch fuels.

But even before the coldest weather has set in, federal funding of the LIHEAP fuel assistance program has badly lagged the rise in energy prices. This year, LIHEAP has been able to help fewer than 15 percent of the estimated 32 million households who qualify for assistance, according to the Campaign for Home Energy Assistance, a coalition of advocates for the federal program. So far this winter, some 5.6 million households have signed up, about 10 percent more than last year.

Congress last month approved \$2.1 billion for LIHEAP for this winter, slightly less than last year's funding. Despite the surge in fuel prices the number of applications for assistance, funding for the program stands roughly where it was when the program was initiated in 1982.

Last summer, as part of a sweeping energy bill that provided financial incentives for the oil industry to drill more oil, tax credits for buyers of fuel efficient vehicles and funding to promote alternative energy, Congress authorized \$5.1 billion for home heating aid. But, last month, it failed to follow through when it approved the final budget package as 2005 drew to a close.

To blunt the impact of higher fuel bills, many cold-weather homeowners have looked for alternatives. For those who can afford them, wood stoves have become a popular way to help keep warm; stove dealers report a sharp increase in sales and a backlog of installation orders. Sales of wood pellet stoves, which burn a special fuel made from sawdust and scrap wood, shot up 100 percent for the first nine months of the year, according to Don Johnson, a spokesman for a trade group that represents stove manufacturers.

“So many people are using them, there are some problems getting the fuel,” he said. Some farm families have taken to burning corn in stoves made specifically for burning the grain. Golden Grain Stoves, based in Colorado, is sold out through April and has stopped taking orders for spring and summer deliveries.

“Every year interest and demand have increased, but this year it went nuts,” said Rod Havens, a company sales manager.

But for those with no alternatives to conventional fuels, monthly bills are taking a serious bite out of household budgets. And many families that have been getting by without assistance may still have to apply for help after the next monthly gas bill or the next oil delivery hits, according to Mark Wolfe, who heads a group that represents state energy assistance directors. Heating oil customers are especially hard hit because few dealers

offer the kind of year-round installment plans available to natural gas customers. As a result, some customers are only ordering half a tank at a time. Oil dealers, especially "mom and pop" operations, have a hard time extending credit because they need to maintain enough cash flow to buy more oil from wholesalers to keep up with deliveries. Last week, the White House approved spending half of some \$200 in emergency funding available under the program, but lawmakers from several cold-weather states have warned that it won't be enough to make it through the winter. State governments have begun to look for additional money from their own budgets, but so far only \$177 million has been allocated, according to Wolfe.

"Right now, we're kind of getting by." He said. "But what happens next month?"

(The Associated Press contributed to this report.)

PUBLISHED: Thursday, January 12, 2006

Prescription for confusion

Federal drug program for seniors causes one problem after another

By LINDA GITTLEMAN
Gratiot Managing Editor

So far, the federal government's new prescription plan has been a source of chaos.

Ever since it went into effect Jan. 1, the problems have been coming in multiples, creating a nightmare for area seniors.

Local pharmacists, trying to help, are put on hold for hours and the seniors needing medication immediately are scared and confused.

From all accounts, the federal program was activated way too soon, as drug companies cannot come close to meeting the demand of its customers.

One of the biggest problems, said Gratiot Commission on Aging Director Craig Zeese, concerns a card the seniors were supposed to receive.

Once someone has signed up for the drug program, he or she is given a confirmation number.

But that number is not what the druggists need. Since several drug companies participating in the program have several plans, the pharmacist needs to know which plan has been selected and that confirmation number doesn't tell them that.

The cards have that information, but very few seniors have received the cards yet.

The senior or pharmacist has no choice but to call the drug company to find out which plan to bill. He or she is placed on hold for at least 45 minutes, and then often as not, disconnected, Zeese said.

"No one can get a hold of anyone," Zeese said. "The drug companies are overwhelmed."

Eventually, if the caller is patient enough, the call will be answered but it usually takes an hour, Zeese said. And it's one senior at a time.

Adding to the problem are a series of snafus that would seem like normal, start-up difficulties except that there are so many of them.

Like a host of others, one Gratiot County woman received a confirmation number but was still somehow not listed on the drug company's computer data bank. Her daughter has tried eight different times to talk to a live person and hasn't gotten through yet, Zeese said.

Until that happens, her mother can't get a prescription under that plan.

The wait for the cards is at least three weeks, Zeese said, adding out that while some companies are sending out letters with the information on them, the letters are taking at least two weeks.

Jon Comden, a pharmacist with Evans Drugs in Alma and St. Louis, said he was able to finally get a software installation on Tuesday that allows him to bypass the wait-on-hold phone calls. By using the customer's Social Security number, he can find out what specific plan the senior is on – not always but in most instances.

But he also told about 60 or 70 of his customers, living in adult foster care who are developmentally disabled and unable to help themselves. All information goes through their guardians, who may live out of state, slowing the process.

Expecting that there would be some problems, Zeese said everyone was caught off guard by the lack of preparation and forethought. The problems seem never ending. If one is solved, another pops up.

"People who have already received their cards are finding out that the wrong plan is coming up on the computer," he said.

That's not all. Most people who have signed up so far have been low income, Medicaid recipients. The government automatically signed them up and randomly chose prescription plans for them. No care was taken as to which program might be best for the senior.

As a result of that random selection, one Gratiot County woman learned that she would have to pay \$309 per month for one of her drugs. Zeese said the woman's total monthly income is about \$600. "What am I going to do?" she asked Zeese. "I can't afford this." Over the weekend, he was able to switch her to another plan that allows her to pay about \$3 a month for the same drug.

These prescriptions, both Zeese and Comden stressed, are often life saving drugs. Seniors can't go a few weeks without them and as low-income seniors, they have no other choice but "calling and waiting, waiting, waiting," Zeese said.

Calls to the Commission on Aging numbered about 50 a day last week. This week, it's about 20, Zeese said.

"I've been talking to all the pharmacists," Zeese said. "Even (Wednesday) things weren't better. Last week they didn't know what to do. At least they and the seniors know now they have to get on the phone and wait."

Still, even if things go smoothly, many of the seniors also are finding out that they still have to pay \$60 or \$70 more than they had before they signed up, Zeese said.

Many more Gratiot seniors have yet to sign up – the deadline is May 15.

"But why would anyone want to sign up for this mess?" Zeese asked.

Social services' use of religion tests limits

U.S. found lacking in effort to watch the groups it funds

By FRANK JAMES
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

WASHINGTON — Faith-based groups are barred from proselytizing or engaging in other obvious religious activity when using federal money to help substance abusers or to encourage teenagers to abstain from premarital sex.

But a number of groups may have run afoul of that federal prohibition.

Lawsuits by the American Civil Liberties Union, Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Freedom from Religion Foundation accuse faith-based organizations and the government of violating the constitutional separation of church and state. Meanwhile, experts say the Bush administration is doing too little to monitor religious groups that get federal money.

Critics cite the Silver Ring Thing program that advocates sexual abstinence to teens. It's known for pulsing, high-tech, multimedia shows at which teenagers can buy silver rings to symbolize their pledges to avoid sex until marriage.

In the past year, the Health and Human Services Department suspended a grant of more than \$1 million to Silver Ring Thing after the ACLU of

Massachusetts sued the department, accusing it of mixing religion with the sexual-abstinence message. At the shows, Silver Ring Thing openly urged teenagers to commit their lives to Jesus, and the rings it sold were each inscribed with a Bible verse.

"When the government looked into the situation in our case, they obviously came to the same conclusion, that in fact their grant was not being used properly and consistently with the Constitution," said Daniel Mach, a First Amendment expert at the Jenner & Block law firm, which has represented the Massachusetts ACLU in the case.

'Little monitoring of faith content'

Experts on faith-based groups that receive federal money say vague government rules have contributed to the situation, as has a lack of government monitoring.

Although Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services and Jewish Family Service long ago learned to clearly separate religion from the government-funded social services they provide, experts say some new recipients of federal funding — often groups operating out of churches, synagogues, mosques and storefronts — are less careful.

And critics say the monitoring of the groups hasn't kept pace with the increase in applicants for money since President George W. Bush began

Flint facility at center of Michigan case

After Joseph Hanas pleaded guilty to marijuana possession, a Genesee County Circuit Court judge gave the 23-year-old Grand Blanc man a choice: Agree to live for a year at Inner City Christian Outreach, a faith-based residential facility in Flint, or go to jail.

Hanas chose Inner City, which is run by a Pentecostal church, and spent seven weeks there in 2003.

Hanas said staff members there told him his Catholic faith was witchcraft and prevented his priest from visiting him. And instead of getting substance-abuse treatment, Hanas said he was forced to read the Bible several hours each day, attend five hours of church on Sundays and told the only way he would successfully complete the pro-

gram was to convert to the Pentecostal faith.

After three months, Judge Robert Ransom responded to Hanas' complaints by removing him and sending him to jail.

Dwight Richard Rottiers, Inner City's pastor, said Hanas was never told he had to convert but was told he had to attend Inner City's services and couldn't attend Catholic services. Rottiers said he told Hanas the program was Christian based before he arrived.

The ACLU filed a federal lawsuit in December seeking to have Hanas released on probation on grounds that the court violated Hanas' right to free exercise of religion as well as the establishment clause requiring the separation of church and state.

— FREE PRESS STAFF AND NEWS SERVICES

lowering their barriers to federal funding in 2001.

"There is little to no monitoring of faith content of services," Frederica Kramer, a scholar at the Urban Institute, a research organization in Washington, said at a recent panel discussion on faith-based groups.

Only the financial and auditing aspects of the social-service arrangements get scrutiny, said Kramer, who with other researchers published a report last year on faith-based groups they studied in Birmingham, Ala., Boston and Denver.

Rules are sometimes unclear

According to the federal

rules, faith-based groups receiving government aid for social service programs may not use federal dollars for any "inherently religious" activities. Further, participation in religious activities by someone who receives assistance must clearly be voluntary.

And people receiving government money to fight substance abuse must be offered a nonreligious alternative if they voice discomfort with the use of a faith-based provider.

But the rules are ambiguous in other areas, Ira Lupu, a George Washington University law school professor, told a conference last month in Atlanta sponsored by the Roundtable

on Religion and Social Welfare Policy.

"Is it permissible," he asked, "to have religious themes, religious content, religious activity, religious focus, religious transformation as part of social service? As part of work training? As part of substance-abuse counseling? As a part of sexual-abstinence teaching?"

Urban Institute researchers discovered an after-school child-care program run by a faith-based group that was cited by federal officials as a model, yet it was using Bible stories to teach reading skills to young children.

How the government monitors

Bush administration officials defend their efforts to inform faith-based organizations on what is and isn't allowed.

"I wouldn't necessarily agree there's not enough guidance," said Josephine Robinson, director of the Office of Community Services within the Health and Human Services Department.

Her office funds programs in four areas: assisting at-risk youths, combating homelessness, providing assistance to rural communities and promoting healthy marriages.

"We provide significant training and guidance to all of our grantees ... about the explicit separation of religious activity and proselytizing from any activities that are funded" by government money, Robinson said.

In the three months since she assumed daily responsibility for the community services office, Robinson said she has increased monitoring, requiring two reviews of the paperwork submitted by the faith-based groups — one by outside contractors and another by her office.

She acknowledged, however, that limits exist in how much direct monitoring of grant recipients her office can do. She has a staff of only four, and restrictions on travel for on-site visits necessitate reliance on written reports and phone contacts with the estimated 330 groups the office oversees.

Jeffrey Trim bath, director of Health and Human Service's abstinence-education program, which funded Silver Ring Thing, said he couldn't discuss the case because of the ACLU's pending lawsuit.

Operating under different federal regulations than Robinson, Trim bath said he hopes his Washington-based staff of six would be able to visit all 144 community-based abstinence-education programs over a 3-year period. To date, he said, "probably five" have gotten "formal site visits."

W-2 reduces 36% of caseload

Mark nears goal, but some say premature exits a factor

By **STEVE SCHULTZE**

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Posted: Jan. 10, 2006

The Wisconsin Works welfare reform program rolls dropped more than 36% over 14 months, an almost bull's-eye hit on an ambitious goal set by Gov. Jim Doyle in September 2004, when the state faced a growing financial crunch.

The Doyle administration credits the W-2 caseload reduction to an improving state economy that has made entry-level jobs more plentiful and an effort to better assess new clients.

Critics charge, however, that many needy W-2 clients have been arbitrarily declared "job-ready," unfairly stripping many of them of their eligibility for monthly payments. Job-ready clients can remain in the W-2 program, but get no cash.

"I hate this system," said Elaine Mitchell.

The single mother, 41, has a 16-year-old daughter and an almost year-old grandson. She was denied re-entry into W-2 last year on the basis of her lengthy job history as a nursing assistant, Mitchell said, even though an ankle injury had made it impossible for her to handle another similar job.

She said she had hoped for a few months' W-2 aid - the program pays up to \$673 a month - to tide her over until she could find an appropriate job.

"It's not fair to us who really need that help," Mitchell said. She's been living at an aunt's home since she lost her apartment in November, but that was supposed to be only temporary.

"She's like, the holidays are over, she needs her house back," Mitchell said.

Lisa Boyd-Gonzalez, W-2 director for the YWCA, said Mitchell was appropriately determined to be ready to work. Boyd-Gonzalez declined to further discuss Mitchell's case, citing client confidentiality rules.

Clients challenging the state's job-ready policy won an early round last year, with an administrative law judge calling the category a misreading of the law that created W-2. That was eight months ago.

In addition, the ruling by Judge Kenneth P. Adler said the state had incorrectly used the job-ready category to reclassify participants already in the program. Under state law, the category was meant only for new applicants who didn't need W-2, he said.

The issue has remained in legal limbo because the ruling is only advisory - Workforce Development Secretary Roberta Gassman has the final say. She is expected to issue a decision in a few weeks, said department spokeswoman Rose Lynch.

Gassman was unavailable for comment.

If Gassman upholds the department's job-ready rules, the case may then be taken to court, said Pat DeLessio, a Legal Aid of Wisconsin lawyer.

Based on discussions with client advocates, the department in 2004 made it harder for local W-2 agencies to cut off aid based on a job-ready determination, Lynch said.

Under the policy, a client found job-ready must have steady and recent work experience; be capable and willing to work; have no disabilities preventing work; and enough education and

training to compete for available local jobs. The old rule allowed clients to be declared job-ready if they met only one of the four criteria.

"It is certainly not our intent for agencies to discourage people from applying," Lynch said. W-2 clients no longer eligible for cash payments still can get various support services, such as child care, transportation aid and other help, she said.

Caseload drops

In September 2004, when Doyle laid out his goal of cutting 40% of the W-2 caseload by 2006, about 12,500 W-2 clients received monthly checks. The number statewide had declined 36%, to 7,954 by November, the most recent figures available.

The drop was sharper in Milwaukee County, where paid W-2 cases dropped 42% during the same period, from 10,075 to 5,818.

State officials point to statistics showing fairly low numbers of job-ready clients. In Milwaukee County, the number of job-ready W-2 clients declined by 44% during the September 2004 to November 2005 period, from 313 to 176.

Those numbers don't tell the whole story, however, say client advocates. Many would-be W-2 participants learn that they are likely to be categorized as ready to work when they first visit a W-2 office and simply give up, said Amy Stear, a women's advocate for the Milwaukee-based 9to5, National Association of Working Women.

"People go to the welfare office when they are desperate, when they've hit total rock bottom and they need money," she said.

Despite a better job climate than a few years ago, she said, many women with significant job histories still are having trouble finding accessible work. Others face the prospect of being dumped from W-2 support payments after completing training even if they can't find jobs, she said.

Women in this predicament "are more apt to have health issues" and other barriers to finding work, Stear said. "People at the agencies just kind of shrug and say, 'You look kind of job-ready to me.' "

Boyd-Gonzalez, of the YWCA, disputed that, saying her agency instituted new client assessment procedures last March that included requiring a manager's review of any decision to label a client job-ready.

"People are not turned around and told if you are job-ready, you are not going to get anything," she said. The YWCA has an emergency assistance fund to help clients who many not qualify for a monthly payment, Boyd-Gonzalez said.

From the Jan. 11, 2006, editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Democrats to petition for minimum wage increase

Thursday, January 12, 2006

By Rick Wilson
The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- Backers of a petition drive to place an increase in Michigan's minimum wage on the November ballot kicked off its effort at Wealthy Street Theatre on Wednesday. About 100 people attended the event, sponsored by Kent County Democrats, which included a panel discussion on why the state hasn't seen an increase in the minimum wage since 1997. Kent County Democratic Chairwoman Sue Levy said polling shows about two-thirds of Michigan voters favor an increase.

"We can't get the legislation moved, so we're taking it to the people," Levy said.

Democrats say they need at least 300,000 signatures statewide by July 1 to place the proposal on the ballot, though they hope to have gathered the needed signatures by June.

The proposal aims to increase the state minimum wage above the \$5.15 federal rate to \$6.85, beginning in 2007. Future increases would be indexed to inflation with the first coming in July 2007, with annual increases each January thereafter.

Jeff Ordower, Midwest director for ACORN, a national community-based group which advocates for low- and moderate-income families, said minimum wage proposals are politically popular issues that have passed overwhelmingly in other states.

Everybody gets worried when workers get a little more, but nobody seems worried when CEOs get a few million extra dollars in bonuses, Ordower said.

Aside from information on the proposal, those gathered Wednesday also received instructions on properly filling out petitions. Levy said while \$6.85 an hour won't get a family of three out of poverty, polling showed voters backing off support once a proposal reached \$7 an hour.

"If we want people to work, we have to provide a dignified wage," Levy said. "We estimate the minimum wage would impact about 30 percent of the households in the state."

Jury: Guilty of assaulting wife

Thursday, January 12, 2006

DARRYL Q. TUCKER
THE SAGINAW NEWS

A former state corrections officer already serving a prison term on a weapons charge involving his wife now is convicted of trying to kill her.

Ronald S. Mielcarek, 35, was in Saginaw County Circuit Court on Wednesday when a jury of eight men and four women found him guilty of assault with intent to murder Danelle I. Hoffman. Jurors deliberated for about 312 hours.

Mielcarek, who is serving two years in prison for possessing a firearm while committing a felony, will receive his sentence Tuesday, Feb. 21. He faces life behind bars.

In June, a jury deadlocked on whether Mielcarek tried to kill Hoffman in their Freeland home in December 2003 after accusing her of having an affair with one of her co-workers.

About 5 a.m. Dec. 3, Mielcarek came home and argued with his wife, authorities said. He took a gun, pointed it at her head and fired, shooting off part of her ear, they said.

Hoffman fled the house, and sheriff's deputies arrived a short time later.

Mielcarek worked at the Buena Vista Corrections Center, 1835 Treanor in Buena Vista Township. Administrators there suspended him the day he faced criminal charges, and the Department of Corrections later fired Mielcarek.

Area organizations seek share of the auto show's fundraiser

Seeing a drop in funds, they want to be included in benefit that donates to same 10 groups annually.

Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

January 12, 2006

For years, many local children's charities have worked to be among the handful of organizations that benefit from the \$7.5 million raised through the auto show's charity preview, to be held Friday.

But the money from the black-tie event -- one of the biggest single-night fundraisers in the country -- has been given to the same 10 children's charities every year. Other organizations want to see that changed, given that natural disasters and state funding cuts continue to strain their budgets.

"We salivate every year," said Kathy Walgren of The Heat and Warmth Fund (THAW), which helps low-income families pay their heat bills. "We have raised the issue: Are you taking new charities? Because we'd like to be one."

The 10 charities, plus a fund for grants to other nonprofits, benefit from the expected 17,500 people who pay \$400 per ticket to preview the auto show. They service at-risk, neglected, abused and disabled local children.

Many of these organizations now depend on the funding for up to 50 percent of their operations, said Robert L. Thibodeau Jr., co-chairman of the auto show.

"It would be difficult to back off on these charities," Thibodeau said.

The charity preview is the second-largest funding source for the Detroit Institute for Children, which provides care to disabled children.

"It has a significant impact on our ability to operate annually," said President Mike Wooley.

The large sum annually raised by the preview has only come in recent years, when the auto show became international and demand for tickets to the gala increased. Of the \$58 million raised since the first charity preview in 1969, \$35 million was raised during the last five years.

This is why in 1999, the Detroit Auto Dealers Association Charitable Foundation Fund was added to expand the number of charities the gala benefits.

But that fund receives just a slice. In 2005, 10 charities split \$300,938 from that fund while the 10 core children's charities shared the rest of the \$7.5 million.

The Michigan Association for Children with Emotional Disorders received a \$35,000 grant in 2002 from the fund to launch a program for delinquent children with untreated emotional disorders.

"It was an extremely important grant for us," said Susan McParland, executive director. "We remain always grateful to the Detroit Auto Dealers Association for their support of this project." Even so, McParland's organization would like to be one of the agencies that benefits annually. "It's a juggernaut," McParland said. "You can't get in."

The Ennis Center for Children -- a local child placement agency providing foster care, adoption services and support programs -- tried for nearly a decade to get in. "I envy the people who are in, given today's times," said President Robert Ennis. "Money is so tight. Everybody needs money to stay alive and to keep servicing children."

The first charity preview was in 1969 and benefited the Old Newsboys Goodfellow Fund of Detroit. Tickets cost \$25; 1,000 were sold.

Today, when patrons buy a ticket, they check off to which charity they want their money to go. Dangleish, who plans to attend with his wife, has designated that their \$800 go to the fund. "It spreads the money around," Dangleish said. "The other charities are getting a substantial amount."

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Scandals in nonprofits shrink reputation, funds

GENESEE COUNTY

THE FLINT JOURNAL FIRST EDITION

Thursday, January 12, 2006

By Kris Turner

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JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

Michael Brown has seen how the public can turn its back on a nonprofit agency tainted by corruption.

It's not pretty.

Since the former Flint public official arrived at Lansing's Capital Area United Way in 2003, he has seen the group fall well short of its fundraising goals, in part because of a notorious 2002 embezzlement case.

The chapter's chief financial official was convicted of stealing \$2 million from the organization. Such cases hit at the heart of nonprofits whose mission is to aid the less fortunate and who must maintain stellar reputations. Otherwise, donations plummet as public confidence collapses.

"We've had a tremendous challenge to educate the community about the steps we have taken to ensure that this would never happen again," said Brown, former president of the Genesee County United Way and a one-time city of Flint department head. "It's been a major challenge." Shiawassee Habitat for Humanity could face a similar challenge because of the alleged embezzlement by its former leader, James M. Downing.

A nonprofit organization's biggest asset is its credibility, said Christopher Nelson, president of the Michigan Association of United Ways.

"I do believe that a lot of credibility can be earned back pretty quickly," Nelson said. "If there were obvious attempts to not be forthright with the embezzlement or an attempt to hide it, I think the public sees through that."

The United Way has had to endure several public relations nightmares, both locally and nationally.

A woman embezzled nearly \$2,000 from the Shiawassee United Way in 2003. In the most notorious such case, William Aramony, former president of the United Way of America, embezzled about \$600,000 from the organization more than a decade ago.

White Lake Township resident Thomas Wood said if a nonprofit group had a history of embezzlement, he would think twice about donating to it.

"You don't know where your money is going to end up," the 22-year-old said. "If it had gotten a lot of publicity, I would definitely think more about it."

In order to win back the public's trust, an organization rocked by scandals must show its good faith. Brown said his United Way chapter has put a number of financial safeguards in place. Plus, its financial books are open to anyone.

"We now have monthly finance committee meetings to review all the financial data to date and to make sure there were no abrupt changes to the system," Brown said. "We also saw the creation of an audit subcommittee."

But those measures win only half the battle, he said. The real fight is to earn the trust of the nearly 3,000 businesses that work with the organization and the public.

"We have a proactive presence in the community to explain to them what we've done," he said.

"We try and be as transparent as possible as to how we run our business."

Three years after the embezzlement, Brown said he wants the group to bounce back and stay on track.

"This year, we are going to go over our goal (for the first time) since the embezzlement," he said.

"All those things we put in place have had a positive impact."